

Louisiana State University LSU Digital Commons

LSU Master's Theses

Graduate School

6-4-2018

Evolving Performance Practice of Debussy's Piano Preludes

Vivian Buchanan

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, vbucha1@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses



Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buchanan, Vivian, "Evolving Performance Practice of Debussy's Piano Preludes" (2018). *LSU Master's Theses*. 4744.
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/4744

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.

EVOLVING PERFORMANCE PRACTICE
OF DEBUSSY'S PIANO PRELUDES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

in

The Department of Music and Dramatic Arts

by

Vivian Buchanan

B.M., New England Conservatory of Music, 2016

August 2018

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Welte-Mignon.....	7
3. The French Harpsichord Tradition.....	18
4. Debussy's Piano Rolls.....	35
5. The Early Debussystes.....	52
Bibliography.....	63
Selected Discography.....	66
Vita.....	67

Abstract

Between 1910 and 1912 Claude Debussy recorded twelve of his solo piano works for the player piano company Welte-Mignon. Although Debussy frequently instructed his students to play his music exactly as written, his own recordings are rife with artistic liberties and interpretive freedom. Interestingly, many of the interpretive gestures that Debussy employs in these recordings are consistent with playing techniques utilized by French Baroque keyboardists. This paper will situate Debussy's own performance in this Baroque playing style. I will first discuss the recording technology used by Welte-Mignon to establish the reliability of these recordings. By studying harpsichord manuals, I will then point out similarities between the highly stylized playing of seventeenth and eighteenth keyboardists and Debussy's recordings. Finally, by comparing Debussy's playing with later twentieth-century recordings of the same works, I will examine trends toward cleaner performances and less artistic liberties.

Chapter 1. Introduction

For over a century Debussy's piano works have existed among the most frequently performed and beloved pieces in the repertoire. Ever since the composition and subsequent popularity of this repertoire, a body of scholarly writing has quickly grown as we develop new ways to conceptualize this music. Until recently, this scholarship has largely focused on aspects of the music itself – tonality, orchestral color, timbral sonorities – the “nuts and bolts” of music. While scholars have developed a multitude of analytical methods to discuss this repertoire, very little has been done to discuss the *performance* of this music in a systematic manner. In the past decade Nicholas Cook has been a leader in this new discipline of performance study, suggesting new criteria with which to study and compare performances.¹ Charles Timbrell has broadly applied some of these principles to Debussy's music, devoting his attention equally to the piano, vocal, and orchestral pieces in short essays.² More recently James R. Briscoe has overseen the collection of essays titled *Debussy in Performance* that tackle a number of performative issues.³ Most of the studies in the book however pertain only to the modern musician and pay little attention to the performing environment in which these pieces were conceived. Cecilia Dunoyer has examined the earliest recordings of Debussy's piano pieces available and pointed out key stylistic differences

¹ Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Performance as Musical Object* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² Charles Timbrell, “Debussy in Performance,” in *Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 259-277.

³ James R. Briscoe, *Debussy in Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

between their execution today and the early-twentieth century.⁴ However, no effort has been made to determine the origin of this earlier playing style.

Thirty years ago the idea of a “historically informed” Debussy performance would have seemed superfluous. The more time we spend with these early recordings however, the greater sense we get of a uniquely improvisatory style of playing quite removed from our modern day standards. Of the most valuable resources available to scholars include a set of piano rolls Debussy recorded with Welte-Mignon between 1910-1912. This collaboration resulted in recordings of twelve pieces: five *Préludes* from Book I including “Danseuses de Delphes,” “La cathédrale engloutie,” “La danse de Puck,” “Minstrels,” and “Le vent dans la plaine,” as well as “La plus que lente,” “La soirée dans Grenade,” “D’un cahier d’esquisses,” and all of *Children’s Corner*. For those wishing to understand how Debussy intended these pieces to be performed, these piano rolls could presumably serve as a blueprint. After all, what could be more definitive than Debussy’s own recording of his music? However, close analysis of the recordings reveals vast differences between Debussy’s playing and his own music, ranging from rhythmic variances, tempo inconsistencies, dynamic fluctuations, and even the notes themselves. These discrepancies between the score and Debussy’s playing have intrigued scholars since the public release of the rolls.

Initially it seemed that these inconsistencies between the score and Debussy’s recording were indicative of errors in the score itself. The likelihood of such errors has since been

⁴ Cecilia Dunoyer, “Early Debussystes at the Piano,” in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 91-118.

undermined by Roy Howat's painstaking 2004 critical edition of Debussy's complete piano works for the Durand *Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*. For this edition, Howat consulted Debussy's autograph manuscripts (available for both Book I of the *Preludes* and all of *Children's Corner* except for no. 3), as well as the first edition of these scores, Debussy's proofs of the first edition, and his sketches, when available. Additionally, Howat consulted the piano rolls themselves, examining the original copies of the rolls together with an original Welte player piano. Considering the wealth of resources consulted to create this critical edition, the likelihood of any glaring errors in the final score is unlikely.

Perhaps most frequently, scholars blame the piano rolls themselves for these irregularities in Debussy's playing. The most vocal critic of the rolls has been Howat, who questions nearly all aspects of the Welte rolls' reliability. For example, based on tempo variances between two different versions of the *Children's Corner* rolls, Howat concludes that the collection's lost master roll was tampered with, and thus the rolls are not a reliable indication of Debussy's playing.⁵ However, as more information about the production of piano rolls has been amassed, particularly on the Welte-Mignon system, scholars have gotten a clearer sense of the aspects of these recordings that remain authentic. For example, while overall tempi of the recordings can be inexact, tempo relations within individual pieces are maintained. Howat himself admits that the rolls are helpful in confirming details such as presumed accidentals missing in other sources.⁶

⁵ Roy Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music: Sources and Performance," in *Debussy Studies*, ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103-104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

Although these recordings are nowhere near perfect, they still offer valuable information about Debussy's music and how he intended it to be performed. By condemning the entire source, scholars undercut a vital resource in the discussion of performance practice. As the only tangible record of Debussy's playing of this repertoire, the information that can be gathered from these rolls is invaluable and warrants further study.

Finally, others dismiss these irregularities as simply mistakes in Debussy's playing. Paul Carlson suggests that prior to the commercialization of recording technology, audiences were more forgiving of performance errors, valuing artistic vision over flawless execution of the score.⁷ Since Debussy recorded his piano rolls before this shift in audience expectations occurred, his deviations from the score can be seen as merely an outgrowth of a more relaxed performing climate. We know from his own statements that Debussy did not prioritize flawless renditions of his music. Recalling her conversations with Ricardo Viñes on Debussy's playing style, Elaine Brody recalls, "Given the choice, he preferred a messy performance, one with dropped notes but with the performer really penetrating the essence of the music to a perfect rendition that was at the same time cold and precise."⁸ On another occasion Marguerite Long recounted a discussion she and Debussy had after he heard a performance of *Pour le piano*: "Sometime in 1917 Debussy went to hear the *Suite* played by a famous pianist. 'How was it?' I asked him on his return. 'Dreadful,' he

⁷ Paul Carlson, "Early Interpretation of Debussy's Piano Music" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1985), 134.

⁸ Elaine Brody, "Viñes in Paris: New Light on Twentieth-century Performance Practice," in *A Musical Offering: Essays in Honor of Martin Bernstein*, ed. Edward H. Clinkscale and Claire Brook (New York: Pendragon, 1997), 49.

replied. ‘He didn’t miss a note.’”⁹ What exactly Debussy could mean by such a criticism is unclear. One could interpret it as a prioritization of artistic inspiration over technical perfection. In his own playing, one can discern technical faltering in demanding pieces such as “Le vent dans la plaine,” with its incessant sixteenth notes. However, it frequently becomes difficult to differentiate technical mistakes from intentional artistic liberties. Was Debussy simply a sloppy pianist who did not care about the accuracy of his playing? Most would assuredly say no. Other deviations from the score, such as Debussy’s exaggeration of rubato or ignoring of tempo markings, seem to be deliberate.

Rather than stemming from poor technique or performance mistakes, I see these irregularities as resulting from an overall sense of improvisatory flexibility in Debussy’s playing. Those who heard Debussy play his own pieces recall a spontaneity in his playing, as if he was creating the music in his head as he went.¹⁰ Based on their accounts, this style stemmed from rhythmic flexibility, dynamic fluctuation, frequent tempo changes, and an overall lightness of touch. A quick glance at the manuscript of the *Preludes* or *Children’s Corner* already shows a plethora of tempo markings and expressive indications. But perhaps such editorial markings can only go so far in creating an expressive performance. I would argue that Debussy stands as part of the larger French keyboard tradition dating back to eighteenth century keyboard masters such as Rameau and Couperin who played with an innate sense of *improvisation*. We know that Debussy

⁹ Carlson, “Early Interpretations,” 150.

¹⁰ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 153-187.

had a close familiarity with this repertoire and its performing style, and looked particularly to Rameau as the greatest French composers to have ever lived. Rather than exposing mistakes in the score or in Debussy's own playing, the irregularities in these recordings reveal minute details of the music that the score was *unable* to express, but that are intrinsic to the French style of playing. Interestingly, if we trace the performances of this music after Debussy's recordings, we begin to see a trend toward more faithful interpretations of the score and a lessening of this improvisatory nature. As these pieces assumed a larger global following, the French freedom of expression was superseded by performances that displayed extreme loyalty to the score.

Before delving into an analysis of Debussy's performances I intend to first discuss the Welte-Mignon recording mechanism. Such an examination of the technology that Debussy used to record his piano rolls is necessary to understand what aspects of these recordings can and cannot be trusted. I will then trace the tradition of French pianism dating back to the eighteenth century, highlighting this school's emphasis on improvisatory playing and artistic freedom. Examination of harpsichord manuals from this time show the frequent use of rhythmic alteration, tempo rubato, and a displacement of melody and bass, similar to techniques employed in the piano rolls. I then will then discuss the discrepancies between Debussy's piano rolls and the score, placing these peculiarities in the scope of the French keyboard tradition. The final chapter of this study will place Debussy's playing in the context of his contemporaries' recordings, emphasizing the great diversity of styles during this period. I will conclude by discussing the effects that recording technology has had on playing, including the narrowing of performance styles and the overall tidying up of playing during the late-twentieth century.

Chapter 2. The Welte-Mignon

Since the bulk of my argument relies on Debussy's own recordings for piano roll, a detailed account of what this technology was and was not capable of documenting is necessary. The first machine to ever use rolls of paper to preserve a pianist's performance was the pianola, created by the Detroit based Aeolian Company in 1898. This formative player piano was powered by suction that was controlled by a pedal at the foot of the piano. While pitches and note duration were faithfully reproduced from perforations in the paper roll, dynamics were determined by the amount of pressure applied to this pedal. Although the person operating the pianola did not have to physically play the notes, he still needed enough musical instinct to learn to control the dynamics as rapidly and elegantly as any skilled pianist.¹¹

The first device to accurately replicate a pianist's full performance (dynamics, rubato, pedaling, etc.) was the "reproducing piano" created in 1904 by the firm of Michael Welte & Soehne in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Germany. Despite its name, this device was not a piano; rather, it was a large wooden cabinet fastened to the front of an ordinary piano that would then "play" with felt-covered wooded fingers. Perforations along the edge of the paper roll indicated dynamics, which were then reproduced using varying levels of suction pressure. Since the device itself was independent from the piano upon which it played, Welte-Mignon could use standard pianos for the reproduction process rather than pianos fashioned only as player pianos.

¹¹ "History of the Pianola – an Overview," The Pianola Institute, last modified 2008, <http://www.pianola.org/history/history.cfm>

The real difficulty lay in the actual recording process. Charles Davis Smith and Richard James Howe were among the first to widely research Welte's unique recording process and document it, noting:

During a recording performance, the motion of the piano keys played by the artist was sensed by a carbon rod attached to the underside of each key. When a key was depressed, its rod plunged into a bath of mercury making an electrical contact which in turn energized an electromagnet. This electromagnet pushed one of a series of inked soft rubber rollers, one for each key, onto a moving paper roll. Each note played was registered in this manner; as long as the key was depressed, the roller remained on the moving paper.¹²

After the recording process was completed, a technician would then make perforations along the marks made by the inked rubber rollers. Marks were also made indicating the velocity at which the hammers struck the strings of the piano, which were then encoded as holes along the edge of the roll. Welte employed only two pianos for the recording process: a Hamburg Steinway grand and a Feurich grand. No one knows which instrument Debussy played.¹³

Although these machines were quite expensive to maintain and too cumbersome for domestic use, they were very popular with composers and pianists. Compared to the primitive recording technology of the early twentieth century, player pianos were capable of clearly and accurately replicating performances with little trouble. Debussy had already recorded three of his *Ariettes oubliées* and an excerpt of *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Mary Garden in 1904; however,

¹² Charles Davis Smith and Richard James Howe, *The Welte Mignon: Its Music and Musicians* (Vestal NY: Vestal, 1994), 17-18.

¹³ Carlson, "Early Interpretation," 119.

these recordings contain a lack of timbral detail and overall clarity. Thus, when Welte-Mignon approached Debussy to record a selection of his solo piano works for their reproducing piano, he quickly agreed. While originally it was assumed that the rolls were recorded in 1913, the inclusion of preludes from Book 1 but not Book 2 suggests that they were recorded between 1910-1912.¹⁴ Additionally, while some of the rolls were released in 1913, this date does not account for the Welte technicians' lengthy process of going over the piano rolls and making perforations where the rollers placed the ink. Although Debussy's original rolls survived World War II, they have since been lost or destroyed. The earliest copies that have survived were made between 1916 and 1919 in Poughkeepsie, NY, although these copies are not necessarily the most faithful available, as we shall see.

What these rolls can tell us is mixed. Although Welte's highly sophisticated system likely created relatively faithful reproductions of Debussy's playing, shoddy copying of these rolls, followed by the subsequent loss of the originals has weakened these recordings' reliability. In 1948 Richard Simonton visited Edwin Welte and made copies of the original piano rolls on his own piano. Under the guidance of Welte, Simonton was able to adjust the tone of the piano and marry the Welte player with different pianos to create the most accurate reproduction possible. These 1948 rolls have been used to create the most recent and authoritative recording that we have of the rolls, published in 2000 by Kenneth Caswell. Caswell met with Simonton in the 1960s, where he

¹⁴ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 101.

learned hitherto unknown information about Welte's recording process.¹⁵ While the copies of the rolls remain imperfect, the utmost efforts towards their preservation and restoration has resulted in increasingly faithful reproductions of Debussy's original Welte-Mignon's piano rolls.

Nevertheless, flaws in the initial recording process of the rolls and their subsequent copies has resulted in musical ambiguities in the recordings. The first such ambiguity lies in the reliability of the recordings' tempo. Since playback depends on the speed at which the roll is set, it is difficult to gauge the exact tempo of each roll. Many of the individual recordings are noteworthy for their quick paces. Most of *Children's Corner* in particular is played at breakneck speed. For example, "The Snow is Dancing" gradually accelerates from quarter note = 116 to quarter note = 144 despite Debussy's instruction to pianist Maurice Dumesnil to play the movement "misty, dreary, monotonous, and not too fast – not fast at all."¹⁶ Likewise, despite his indication to play the movement only *modérément animé*, Debussy's recording of "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" opens swiftly at quarter note = 160 and ends at a brisk quarter note = 200. The performance lasts 1 minute, 46 seconds, making Debussy's the fastest known recording of the piece to date.¹⁷ More curiosities are revealed when we compare several different disc transfers of the rolls. For example, while Caswell's version of "Doctor Gradus" lasts 1:46, another version issued on Columbia clocks in even faster with a duration of 1 minute, 32 seconds.

¹⁵ Carlon, "Early Interpretation," 122.

¹⁶ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 162.

¹⁷ Cecilia Dunoyer, "Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano," in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 95-96.

One possible explanation for this variance in tempo is the thickness of paper used for the rolls. When Debussy recorded his pieces, Welte rolls were recorded using relatively thin, fragile paper. However, by the late 'teens the company had switched to thicker, sturdier paper. Around this time Welte began to make copies of these earlier rolls for all subsequent examination and consultation to preserve the more fragile original copies.¹⁸ Since the overall thickness of the roll helps determine the playback speed, such differences should be accounted for in subsequent copies made of the master roll. Unfortunately, we do not know to what extent the earliest copies accounted for this variance in paper thickness. Likewise, the Welte-Mignon mechanism used an air motor that could at times suffer from technical problems that would affect playback tempo. Electrical motors have since solved this problem, but mistakes in earlier rolls due to the older motors are difficult to fix.¹⁹

Despite the ambiguity of the rolls' tempi, other early recordings of this music suggest that Caswell's 2000 disc transfer is not far off the mark. The French pianist Alfred Cortot was the only pre-war pianist to record *Children's Corner*. As the first performer to extensively record Debussy's piano music on traditional recording technology, his recordings offer valuable insight into the environment and tradition in which Debussy conceived these pieces. Interestingly, Cortot's performance durations and overall tempi are very similar to Debussy's (both composers play "Serenade of the Doll" in exactly 1 minute, 46 seconds, for example).

¹⁸ Smith and Howe, *The Welte Mignon*, 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

Paul Carlson suggests the reliability of tempi in Welte's recordings could be checked through a comprehensive comparison of early Welte piano rolls with contemporary recordings. Over three thousand early Welte rolls exist, and many of the pieces contained in these rolls were also recorded on 78 rpm discs by the same performers. While slight performance variations are bound to exist, a comprehensive comparison of such data would determine the accuracy of the Welte rolls' tempi. Carlson's own such comparison of a Granados recording of a Scarlatti sonata for both Welte and a 78 rpm disc reveal strikingly similar tempi.²⁰ Unfortunately, hardly any musicians recorded the same pieces for both piano roll and 78 rpm discs, so such a large-scale comparison is not possible.

Another fault of the reproducing piano is its inability to record dynamic subtleties. This is because the recording mechanism worked largely in binaries. Volume was recorded by determining the speed of the hammers as they struck the strings. When transferred to the paper itself, hammer speed correlated with the size of the holes cut into the roll. Although this system allowed for precise volume levels, it could only record dynamics in three states: static, increasing, or decreasing.²¹ This worked well for thinner textures that contained one main melodic idea, but thicker polyphonic passages with multiple layers of musical material frequently confused the recording mechanism, which was unable to decipher the various rates of crescendos and decrescendos. Likewise, the machine was best at recording dynamic extremes. While

²⁰ Carlson, "Early Interpretation," 128-129.

²¹ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 102.

performances that featured a wide margin of dynamic fluctuation were the easiest to register, the mechanism was not sensitive enough to register minute dynamic changes, such as *PPP* growing to *P*. The latter is the style of playing that Debussy was known for, playing that relied on a variety of subtle pianistic colors and nuances. It is thus difficult to say with authority whether the dynamics captured by the Welte transcription are authentic.

The above-mentioned tempo and dynamic issues are largely the result of Welte's recording process. Additionally, many difficulties also arise from the later process of copying the rolls. During periods of mass-production, poorly maintained copying machines were more prone to make mistakes. For example, if the machine was poorly lubricated, a hole controlling pedaling would slip into the wrong position and record an inaccurate pedaling. Similarly, poor lubrication could result in holes for quickly-repeating notes like trills to be punched too closely together, resulting in a held note rather than quick repetitions.²² Thankfully, multiple copies were frequently made of the same master roll, and such mistakes were rarely made twice. Careful examination between these copies and their master roll can quickly reveal where these mistakes were made. Likewise, such mistakes in pedaling or note articulation were frequently quite abrupt and would have been easily detected by an editor or recording technician. Richard Simonton's 1948 copies underwent direct scrutiny from both himself and Edwin Welte, and can most likely be trusted. As stated above, Caswell's 2000 disc transfer was made using these 1948 copies, and was created under the consultation of Simonton himself so as to best replicate the original recording device.

²² Smith and Howe, *The Welte Mignon*, 34-37.

Roy Howat has argued that the Welte-Mignon was incapable of recording half pedaling, a nuance that Debussy was frequently credited with.²³ This turns out to be only half true. The *playback* piano was only able to depress the pedal fully or not at all, thus leaving no room for half pedaling. However, the recording device was able to decipher a type of pedaling in which the pedal is lifted very quickly and depressed, so that the dampers graze the strings just long enough to only partially dampen the vibrations.²⁴ Since the earliest playback pianos were not able to reproduce this type of pedaling, it was assumed that the recording device itself was at fault. Only recently have disc transfers been able to faithfully showcase such nuanced pedaling.

Robert Philip has suggested that since playback is dependent on the characteristics of the piano on which the roll is replayed, piano rolls are not an accurate indication of a composer's intended sound. According to Philip, "It can never be wholly satisfactory to record the actions of a pianist on one piano, and then transfer this information to a different piano... Anyone who has ever witnessed a concert pianist trying out an unfamiliar piano will know what an absurd suggestion this is."²⁵ This argument fails to consider however that even live performances of piano works vary from piano to piano. Just as different pianos possess differing acoustical properties and hammer conditions, so too will recordings not be able to account for the numerous factors that could affect a performance. We would not discredit Rachmaninoff's performance of his second

²³ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 102.

²⁴ Carlson, "Early Interpretations," 124-125.

²⁵ Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 32.

piano concerto played on a Yamaha instead of the composer's own personal Steinway. Debussy himself was aware of the limitations imposed by the instrument; during a coaching he is quoted as saying "pedaling cannot be written down. It varies from one instrument to another, from one room, or one hall, to another."²⁶ Piano performances are unique in the variability inherent in the instrument itself; rather than discrediting rare sources such as the piano rolls in the name of an unattainable "ideal recording," we should focus on what these rolls *can* tell us about how the composer might have adjusted his performance to fit his performing conditions.

To what extent then can Debussy's piano rolls be trusted? Despite the limitations recounted above, numerous accounts vouch for the painstaking detail that was afforded to the recording, copying, and preservation of Debussy's rolls. It is believed that Edwin Welte and Karl Bockisch themselves scrutinized dynamic indications in the earliest rolls for musical continuity.²⁷ While the original recording process has created some doubts about the reputability of these documents, the expert examination and preservation of these rolls has given us as accurate a representation of Debussy's original recordings as possible. Considering Richard Simonton's conversations with Welte, as well as Welte's own oversight of Simonton's copying process, we can confidently presume that Simonton's 1948 copies are an accurate replica of the now lost original 1912 rolls. Although aspects of performance such as overall tempo remain uncertain, the work of technicians such as Kenneth Caswell to replicate the exact recording conditions as accurately as possible gets us quite close to a faithful reproduction of Debussy's original performance. More confidently,

²⁶ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 163.

²⁷ Smith and Howe, *The Welte Mignon*, 17-18.

aspects such as *relative* tempo within individual rolls has been maintained, so nuances such as tempo fluctuations and more local rubato can be discussed with authority. Likewise, relative dynamics have been accurately preserved. The feature of the Welte mechanism responsible for pitch recording was extremely reliable, allowing Roy Howat to isolate a few key typos in earlier scores of Debussy's preludes for his 2007 critical edition.²⁸ Perhaps the biggest proponent for the accuracy of the piano rolls was Debussy himself; in 1913 after the first issue of the rolls was released, Debussy wrote to Edwin Welte:

It is impossible to attain a greater perfection of reproduction than that of the Welte apparatus. I am happy to assure you in these lines of my astonishment and admiration at what I heard.

Howat has suggested that Debussy's stamp of approval could have been motivated by a forthcoming paycheck from Welte.²⁹ However, this letter was sent over a year after the presumed date of the recordings, likely well after payment would have been received. More so, until such an ulterior motive can be proven, it seems presumptuous to undermine Debussy's own statements as false. Paul Carlson has collected some forty-two testimonials in favor of the Welte recordings by notable figures such as Alexander Scriabin, Edvard Grieg, Camille Saint-Saens, Gustav Mahler, and Richard Strauss, among others.³⁰ The likelihood of so many respected composers providing false testimony about the quality of their own recordings for the sake of a paycheck

²⁸ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 102.

²⁹ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 103.

³⁰ Carlson, "Early Interpretations," 119.

remains doubtful. With the capabilities of the Welte-Mignon system established, let us now turn to Debussy's own recordings to examine what the rolls can reveal about his pianism.

Chapter 3. The French Harpsichord Tradition

Musicians aspiring to a “historically accurate” performance of Debussy’s piano works have at their disposal a multitude of resources to guide them. The first step in such an endeavor would be to consult the score itself, which reveals an abundance of expressive markings. Any ambiguities that may have existed in earlier editions have been cleared up by Row Howat’s 2007 critical edition of the complete piano works, which consulted Debussy’s autograph manuscript as well as other early editions, recordings, and sketches, when available.

Pianists may also choose to consult Debussy’s own personal statements about his music, as well as the first-hand accounts by musicians who studied with him and heard him play. Debussy repeatedly stressed his preference for strict adherence to the score. When asked why so few people were able to play his music, Debussy responded, “I think it is because they try to impose themselves upon the music. It is necessary to abandon yourself completely and let the music do as it will with you – to be a vessel through which it passes.”³¹ Marguerite Long recalls a story in which, during a coaching, a young pianist stopped at a passage and naively suggested to the composer, “Master, according to me this should be ‘free.’” Debussy curtly replied, “There are some who write music, some who edit it, and there is this gentleman who does what he pleases.” When later asked who he envisioned as his perfect *Melisande*, he answered: “A faithful interpreter is sufficient.”³² This prioritization of highly accurate performances is evinced in the elaborate

³¹ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 167.

³² *Ibid.*, 176.

expressive markings in his scores, as well as in the often-grueling coaching sessions that he would subject his performers to.

Yet an equally numerous collection of letters and personal accounts show Debussy stressing the importance of the performer's freedom of expression and the variability of performance. During a coaching he reportedly instructed: "Pedaling cannot be written down. It varies from one instrument to another, from one room, or one hall, to another... *Faites confiance à votre Oreille.*" (entrust it to your ear).³³ Concerning rubato and rhythmic freedom, the composer proclaimed: "You cannot show rhythm exactly any more than you can show exactly the exact expression of a phrase. The best thing is to rely on your personal feeling."³⁴ He notoriously disliked writing exact metronome markings or fingerings in his pieces, declaring that such factors were impossible to pin down with musical notation.³⁵ Many of Debussy's students later expressed their confusion when faced with his contradictory instructions to strictly adhere to the score while also exercising their artistic freedom. For example, during a coaching session Debussy complained that Maurice Dumesnil did not play the triplets in the first two lines in "Hommage à Rameau" in time. Later in the same coaching while playing "Clair de lune", Dumesnil recounted that "Again the matter of triplet values came up. Now [Debussy] found them too *strictly* in time. It was all right in

³³ Ibid., 163.

³⁴ Richard Langham Smith, "Debussy on Performance: Sound and Unsound Ideals," in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 10.

³⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

a way, he said, but they ought to be included ‘within a general flexibility.’”³⁶ This flexibility remained a common theme throughout Debussy’s coachings with pianists as well as singers.

Debussy’s piano rolls and the recordings of his contemporaries support this theory that performers frequently took artistic liberties with the score. In his work on early recordings and performance style, Robert Philip has concluded that this flexibility was inherent in the playing style of all early twentieth century musicians: “The performances of the early twentieth century are volatile, energetic, flexible, vigorously projected in broad outline but rhythmically informal in detail.”³⁷ Modern day musicians often listen in bewilderment to the highly personalized, improvisatory, borderline-messy playing of Debussy and his contemporaries. These performances were characterized by the use of substantial tempo fluctuations in response to changes in mood, alterations of rhythm, and the displacement of melody and accompaniment. In the context of Debussy’s music, Richard Langham Smith attributes these stylistic features to a certain “esprit debussyste” that informed early performances.³⁸ Likening these playing styles captured on early recordings to a “lost tradition,” he argues for a highly stylized method of performance that was inherent in the performing tradition at the time. Such a playing style would have been second nature to most musicians, and it was therefore not required to explicitly notate such gestures in the

³⁶ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 159.

³⁷ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 236.

³⁸ see Smith, “Debussy on Performance.”

score. Given these considerations, Debussy's instructions to follow the score exactly would have been understood in the context of the general flexibility allowed to performers at the time.

A Uniquely French Style

While I concede that performers during the early twentieth century likely played with an understanding of certain stylized expressive gestures, an attempt to trace these nuances back to their origins and place them in a historical context has not yet been undertaken. Debussy is a unique case of a composer who was acutely aware of his past and the musical tradition from which he originated. After briefly succumbing to the seductive influence of Wagner during his youth, Debussy doubled back and became a staunch advocate for a uniquely French style of composition and performance.³⁹ He frequently expounded upon the necessity to liberate French music from Germanic tyranny. While organizations such as the Société Nationale de Musique looked to contemporary French composers to liberate French music from the grips of Wagner, Debussy looked back much further to the eighteenth century as the solution. Letters and personal statements abound professing his admiration of Baroque composers and keyboardists such as François Couperin, Jean-Henri d'Anglebert, and Jean-Philippe Rameau. Expressing his frustration with the German influence on French music, Debussy lamented: "It will take France innumerable years to work out of that influence, and when we look back upon the original French writers such as Rameau, Couperin, Daquin, and men of their period, we can but regret that the foreign spirit

³⁹ Jane Fulcher, "Debussy's Nationalism," in *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170-193.

fastened itself upon that which would have been a great school.”⁴⁰ Debussy’s devotion to this school of musicians, particularly Rameau, would lead to displays of devotion including titling one of his *Images* “Hommage à Rameau” and making grand proclamations such as: “since Rameau, we have had no purely French tradition. His death severed the thread, Ariadne’s thread, that guided us through the labyrinth of the past.”⁴¹ Rather than viewing *himself* as the savior of French music against German invasion, he looked back to Rameau and the French Baroque tradition as the savior. Anya Suschitzky views Rameau as an extension of Debussy’s own national identity: “Rameau and Debussy emerge phoenixlike from the ruins to serve a monolithic national style. The two composers are indissolubly linked: Rameau finds continuance in Debussy just as Debussy remains present in a revived Rameau.”⁴² He relied on Rameau to serve as a link between himself and the French tradition prior to the German intrusion.

Most composers during the baroque period were also talented harpsichordists, as evinced by their sizeable output for the instrument. While there are no recordings from this era to display these composers’ playing style, keyboard manuals provide detailed performance instructions. These manuals reveal a highly stylized, ornate method of playing consisting of a host of expressive techniques and mannerisms that keyboardists were expected to apply to their performances. Interestingly, many of these mannerisms are present in Debussy’s piano rolls and other early

⁴⁰ Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings of the Great French Composer*, ed. François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc.), 233.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 322-323.

⁴² Anya Suschitzky, “Debussy’s Rameau: French Music and its Others,” *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 399.

recordings, as we shall see. In the context of twentieth-century performance practice, these mannerisms can be viewed as simply a general freedom of expression that was allowed of musicians during the early years of recording technology. However, I would like to take a step back and examine Debussy's playing style in the context of this French Baroque harpsichord tradition.

We know that Debussy was acutely aware of the performing tradition characteristic of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He attended several performances of Rameau's staged works, including *Castor et Pollux*, *La guirlande*, *Hippolyte et Aricie*, *Les indes galantes*, and *Dardanus*. These works were enthusiastically received by the composer, given the several lengthy reviews he published in *Gils Blas*.⁴³ Debussy would likely have been introduced to this performance tradition during his time at the Paris Conservatoire.⁴⁴ He would eventually serve as editor of *Les fêtes de Polymnie* in Rameau's *Oeuvres complètes*, the first French critical edition ever devoted to a composer.⁴⁵ Given Debussy's apparent fascination with this repertoire as well as his involvement in Rameau's critical edition, it is likely that he became intimately acquainted with the performance tradition that surrounded these works. From there he may have adopted some of these mannerisms in his own playing. I intend to first trace some of the idiosyncrasies of this French Baroque performance style, consulting harpsichord manuals and other firsthand accounts

⁴³ Debussy, *Debussy on Music*.

⁴⁴ John R. Clevenger, "Debussy's Paris Conservatoire Training," in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 299-262.

⁴⁵ Suschitzky, "Debussy's Rameau," 414.

of this style. I will then attempt to situate Debussy's own recordings in this historical narrative, pinpointing holdovers from the earlier tradition. It is of course unfeasible to suggest that every aspect of Debussy's playing manifests from a conscious decision to imitate baroque harpsichordists. However, given the plentitude of Debussy's statements glorifying this tradition, it is likely that Debussy, consciously or unconsciously, incorporated certain aspects of this tradition in his own playing.

For every technique introduced in harpsichord manuals from this era, the instruction is usually followed by a caveat encouraging the performer to use his own best judgement when executing such techniques. Thus, a general flexibility towards performance from this era can be traced to the twentieth century. Despite this flexibility, certain stylistic features remain consistent throughout the bulk of the literature, including rhythmic alteration, expressive articulations, dance rhythms, and tempo rubato. Many of these elements were commonly understood by French musicians at the time, and were learned through instruction, pedagogical treatises, or simply environmental immersion. Because this performance style was so engrained in musicians, it was not necessary to notate such features in scores. This has parallels to recordings from the early twentieth century that display similar discrepancies between the written score and what is played. Most stylistic features that are characteristic of French baroque playing pertain to aspects of rhythm and meter; consequently, these aspects will constitute the bulk of my analysis of Debussy's recordings.

As we know, French music had wide-reaching effects on musical styles all throughout Europe. Thus, to claim that these traits are present only in the pianism of French musicians would

be to ignore the vast exchange of music and culture that took place during and after the Baroque period. Rather than suggesting that the French harpsichord tradition resulted in a niche style of playing that is only evident in Debussy's recordings, I hope to show how Debussy engaged with his past and embraced a particular style of playing that he saw as emblematic of his French heritage.

Rhythmic Alteration

François Couperin best characterized the limitations of conventional musical notation in 1717 when he wrote:

In my view there are defects in our way of writing music, which correspond to the manner of writing our language. It is that we write differently than we play, which causes foreigners to play our music less well than we play theirs. For example, we point several eights that proceed by conjunct degrees; however, we mark them equal; our custom has enslaved us, and we continue.⁴⁶

Rhythmic alteration, or the performance of rhythms in a manner other than how they were written, is one of the defining traits of French baroque music. Commonly referred to as *notes inégales*, this alteration could surface as either the rhythmic alteration of equally notated pitches, or the further alteration of already unequally notated pitches. The rhythmic inequality familiar to most musicians stems from this latter alteration of already unequal pitches. This practice is frequently referred to as “over-dotting,” and is indicated *pointer* in scores from this era.⁴⁷ In this practice, rhythms that are already written in dotted figurations are exaggerated to lengthen the

⁴⁶ François Couperin, *The Art of Playing the Harpsichord*, ed. and trans. Margery Halford (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1974), 49.

⁴⁷ Stephen E. Hefling, *Rhythmic Alteration in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Music: Notes Inégales and Overdotting* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 12.

dotted note and shorten the consequent note. Such an articulation added grandeur to music and became associated with processions of the nobility. This style is most frequently displayed in the French Overture, the outer sections of which typically feature dotted rhythms. Detailed records of this articulation were first made by Étienne Loulié, who suggested that in performing a dotted eighth and sixteenth the first note is “held a bit longer” and the other “passed through quickly.”⁴⁸ Couperin further explains “short notes which follow dotted ones are always shorter in execution than their notated length... when four or more short notes follow a dot they are played with dispatch, there being so many of them... short notes, when they precede dotted ones, are also played more rapidly than their notation indicates.”⁴⁹

Scholarly opinion differs on why exactly rhythmic inequality was adopted in French baroque music. The general consensus is that it lent the music gracefulness and emphasized defining musical styles of certain genres. In Baroque dances for example, shorter upbeats would lend a greater propulsion to the downbeat to facilitate dancing. Others argue that this inequality was an outgrowth of singers’ exaggeration of the natural speech patterns of the French language.⁵⁰ Loys Bourgeois in 1550 explained that performers should utilize rhythmic inequality because “the

⁴⁸Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time: A History of Tempo Rubato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27.

⁴⁹ Couperin, *The Art of Playing*, 35.

⁵⁰ See Frederick Neumann, “The Notes inegales Revisited,” *The Journal of Musicology* 6/2 (Spring, 1988): 137-149.

first [note] is a consonance, and the second most often a dissonance.”⁵¹ Thus, *notes inégales* could have served a harmonic function rather than a melodic one.

The degree to which inequality should be exaggerated is among the most crucial concerns of early performance practice. As Couperin warns, “the time of the short notes after the dots cannot actually be fixed with complete exactness.”⁵² Modern performers frequently over-simplify *notes inégales* as merely double-dotting. Records from the eighteenth century reveal, however, that over-dotting was subject to a wide degree of gradation. Stephen Hefling has compiled a list of writings by 30 prominent French keyboardists from this period, outlining the extreme variability in approach.⁵³ Inequality was frequently determined by stylistic traits of the music itself, in conjunction with the pianist’s ability to recognize these traits. Saint-Lambert observed that:

When one must inequalize the notes, it is up to taste to decide whether they should be a little or strongly unequal. There are pieces where it is good to make them strongly unequal, and others where they should be less. Taste judges this, as in the case of tempo.⁵⁴

This notion that the music itself dictates rhythmic inequality was a popularly held opinion. As the organist Père Engramelle advised:

This inequality ought to vary according to the nature of the piece; in gay airs it should be more marked than in those that are gracious and of tender expression, more in marches than in minuets; however, there are a number of minuets of character in which the inequality is as marked as in marches. Taste will make this difference sensible.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Hefling, *Rhythmic Alteration*, 3.

⁵² Couperin, *The Art of Playing*, 8.

⁵³ Hefling, *Rhythmic Alteration*, 8-11.

⁵⁴ Monsieur de Saint-Lambert, *Principles of the Harpsichord*, ed. Rebecca Harris-Warrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 46.

⁵⁵ Hefling, *Rhythmic Alteration*, 20.

While most French keyboardists provide highly detailed instructions for rhythmic alteration, nearly all harpsichord manuals contain similar instructions to keyboardists to rely on their own personal taste and intuition first and foremost. Therefore, in addition to the principles of rhythmic alteration outlined above, a general spirit of artistic liberty can be ascribed to the French performance tradition. Rather than being subservient to the score, performers were encouraged to approach pieces as interpreters with the freedom to impart their own artistic vision on the score. While some of the highly stylized aspects of French Baroque performance diminished as the repertoire changed, this general flexibility of performance remained a constant in the French keyboard tradition.

Tempo Rubato

In addition to localized moments of rhythmic alteration, performances during the baroque era frequently featured a broader displacement between the melody and accompaniment. The accompaniment was expected to remain steady while the melodic line was free to travel with relative metric freedom. This first originated in vocal music in which the singer would alter the meter for expressive effect while the accompanist kept time. However, as keyboard music developed into an autonomous genre, performers began incorporating similar practices into their playing. Instead of melodic displacement occurring between a soloist and an accompanist, keyboardists would play strict accompaniment in one hand simultaneously with the rhythmically free melody in the other. Thus, the hands were viewed as two independent musical lines.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Hudson, *Stolen Time*, 113-118.

French keyboardists tended to discuss displacement not in terms of entire melodic phrases, but as localized vertical sonorities. In other words, harpsichord manuals would focus on individual chords and the rate at which each of their notes should be spaced out between the hands. Notes that would otherwise have been heard simultaneously were now heard independently. This practice of spacing out chords between the left and right hands would eventually come to be known as *arpeggiation*, but it originated as the flexibility of a melodic phrase over its accompaniment.

The practice of allowing the hands to play with relative freedom was common during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and overwhelmingly encouraged. Foucquet states that “in all pieces that require a gracious or tender execution, one ought to play the bass note before that of the melody, without altering the beat, which produces a suspension on each note of the melody.”⁵⁷ Similar instructions were expressed by Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Forqueray, who used crosses to indicate moments in his *Pièces de clavecin* in which chords in the left hand should be played before those in the right. He clarified these markings, stating: “To play this piece in the way I should like it played, the performer should note how it is written, the right hand being hardly every quite together with the left.”⁵⁸ French music theorist and lutenist Perrine describes a certain *harpègement ou separation* regarding two-note chords in lute music. These notes, although written

⁵⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 26.

together, would be staggered so that each note is heard individually. The following figure transcribed from Perrine's *Harpègement* displays how such an articulation would be performed.



Figure 3.1 *Harpègement* for lute (Perrine, 1680)

As displacement became more abundant in performance, the tendency to arpeggiate vertical notes grew into the French harpsichord tradition of rolled chords. Such a gesture would be used to emphasize cadences or downbeats and add a dramatic flourish. In addition to displacement between melody and accompaniment, the use of rolled chords for dramatic emphasis remained a staple of the French performing tradition well into the twentieth century.

In his studies of rhythmic alteration, Richard Hudson has outlined two different types of tempo rubato. The earlier style of rubato is defined by the type of melodic displacement just described. Increasingly however, keyboardists found it difficult to maintain autonomy between the hands. Hudson cites a letter from Mozart to his father in which the composer bemoans contemporary pianists' inability to maintain this independence of the hands; "What people cannot grasp is that in tempo rubato in an Adagio, the left hand should go on playing in strict time. With

them the left hand always follows suit.”⁵⁹ While pianists could execute the rhythmic flexibility of the right hand with relative ease, they struggled with maintaining a steady beat in the left hand. The left hand increasingly began following the expressive gestures of the right hand, and a unified change in tempo would occur between the hands. This developed into what Hudson calls “later” rubato, which was defined by a general modification in the tempo of the entire musical texture.

Many of the ornaments outlined in French harpsichord manuals are products of this later type of rubato. Couperin outlines a type of ornament called a suspension, in which a note – preceded by three or more ascending notes – is delayed by a slight pause. In addition to this pause before the final note, he mentions a general retardation that occurs over the ascending line. Such an articulation is reproduced below in figure 3.2:



Figure 3.2 *L’art de Toucher le Clavecin* (Couperin, 1713)

Couperin was acutely aware of the expressive limitations of the harpsichord, particularly its inability to vary in volume. Speaking of this limitation, he writes: “It has seemed almost impossible, up to the present, for anyone to give soul or feeling to this instrument.” He goes on to suggest however that through the use of ornaments, particularly suspensions, the harpsichord is

⁵⁹ Ibid., 113.

able to achieve expressive effects similar to “a bowed instrument increasing its tone.”⁶⁰ Thus, ornaments and rubato were used as expressive vehicles to directly move the emotions.

The use of melodic displacement and tempo rubato was also prevalent in performing traditions outside of France. In Germany, Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg wrote extensively on the art of syncopated displacement and rubato. He spent the better part of 1746 in Paris, where he undoubtedly became acquainted with the keyboard masters and their performing tradition. This is evinced in his own *Principes du clavecin*, which offers instructions for melodic displacement similar to those offered in French harpsichord manuals. Marpurg presents rubato in his harpsichord manuals as a “figure of composition,” hence not as a method of delivery determined by a performer. Likewise, his manuals do not encourage the performer to consult the “character of the piece” for such stylistic choices, as the French manuals do. Whereas Couperin demanded different treatment of slow and tender pieces, Marpurg viewed melodic displacement as a purely technical maneuver. This displays the unique character of French performance: whereas French keyboardists utilized melodic displacement and rhythmic alteration similarly to musicians from other countries, such techniques stemmed from a direct expression of the music rather than a strict code of performance tricks. Overwhelmingly the French were urged to trust their own musical taste and preferences in performance rather than concrete rules and guidelines.

Such manipulations of rhythmic alternation, *notes inégales*, melodic displacement, and tempo rubato served as the basis for the French keyboard tradition. As these aspects of

⁶⁰ Couperin, *The Art of Playing*, 33-34.

performance flexibility came to define French pianism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is no wonder that certain aspects of this style were preserved in nineteenth century playing styles as well. Prior to the patent of the double escapement mechanism in 1821, a technique similar to those espoused by Rameau and Couperin was primarily taught, including independent fingers staying close to the keys and an overall avoidance of force. This style can be seen in the method books and exercises used by most of the century's early piano professors, including Louis Adam, Friedrich Kalkbrenner, and Pierre Zimmermann. Kalkbrenner is important because we can trace the French style of playing known as *jeu perlé* to him, characterized by "rapid, clean, even passage work in which each note is bright and perfectly formed, like each pearl on a necklace."⁶¹ A recording made by Saint-Saëns late in his life showcases this clear, precise finger technique.

While he never studied at the Paris Conservatoire, after moving to Paris in 1831 Chopin's playing style largely influenced French pianists. A sense of restraint so commonly associated with French playing is attributed to his style. Despite this restraint, he was known to frequently take liberties with tempo and indulge in rubato. Since Chopin never made any recordings, it becomes difficult to know if this manipulation of tempo was in keeping with Baroque techniques or simply an outgrowth of Romantic expression. Thus, although elements of Baroque keyboard technique may have been preserved during the nineteenth century, Debussy's position as one of the first composers to record his own works makes him a prime subject to study. More so, given his particular admiration of the French Baroque masters and his familiarity with their style of playing, it stands to reason that his playing would be particularly influenced by this style.

⁶¹ Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism: A Historical Perspective* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1999), 38.

Instances of gestures such as *notes inégales* and tempo rubato in twentieth century performances are frequently interpreted as simply artistic liberties. Indeed, as keyboardists from the Baroque era viewed such ornaments and gestures as tools for emotional expression, we can also interpret the general flexibility with which twentieth century pianists played as stemming from the broader French harpsichord tradition of interpretive freedom. As we shall see, instances of these gestures in Debussy's playing often coincide with moments of intense musical expression. This emphasis on taste is perhaps the reason why many of the earliest pianists were confused by Debussy's rather vague instruction to play with expressivity. This required an intimate familiarity with the French keyboard tradition in addition to the ability to emphasize certain musical features inherent in the music without imparting too much of one's own voice. With this greater understanding of the French harpsichord tradition, let us now turn to Debussy's piano rolls to examine how this performance practice influenced his interpretations of his own music.

Chapter 4. Debussy's Piano Rolls

“La soirée dans Grenade”

Debussy's recording of *La Soirée dans Grenade* includes several stylistic features reminiscent of the French harpsichord tradition. The piece is the second of three included in Debussy's *Estampes*, completed in 1903. Meant to evoke images of Grenada, “La Soirée” was written after the composer spent a day in San Sebastián de los Reyes, near Madrid. Since the composer likely did not gain an intimate familiarity with the native music of Grenada just during the few hours he spent outside the city, he instead chose to portray Spain using the ever-popular habanera bass as well as sections meant to imitate guitar strumming. He suggests this leisurely mood by indicating that the piece is to be played “dans un rythme nonchalamment gracieux.”

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Debussy's performance of “La soirée” is his practice of over-dotting the recurring habanera bass. The habanera bass, initially an outgrowth of Cuban dance music, is characterized by a dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth note and two eighth notes. By the early twentieth century the rhythm had come to generally be associated with Latin music as well as the tango. In “La Soirée,” this rhythm occurs in nearly every measure, serving as a ground bass of sorts. Interestingly, when the dotted pattern is played by itself, Debussy maintains the rhythmic integrity of the figure. However, when a melody is added and the pattern becomes accompanimental, it is played with much greater flexibility. For example, the pattern is played evenly through the first six measures as the alternate hand plays only octave half notes. However, when the right hand introduces the opening melody in m. 7, Debussy abandons the strict subdivisions of the bass pattern and begins to lengthen the dotted eighth note. This rhythmic

inequality culminates in mm. 15-16 in which the figure is double-dotted, as in a French overture. Moments in which the dotted pattern is layered with triplet figures yield the most rhythmic inequality, such as mm. 23-27 (figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1. “La soirée dans Grenade,” mm. 23-27.

To fit the entire triplet in before playing the left hand sixteenth note, Debussy resorts to double-dotting the eighth note and clipping the consequent sixteenth. Measures in which triplet patterns are not played feature far less exaggeration of the habanera pattern.

This relationship between the habanera bass and melody is reminiscent of the earlier type of rubato characteristic of French keyboard music. As discussed in chapter 3, in such rubato the accompaniment remains steady while the melody is free to traverse with relative flexibility. Interestingly, in the Debussy piano rolls the *accompaniment* is granted greater flexibility when layered with a melodic part. Rather than serving as the metric backbone of the piece, the accompaniment is included in the general languorous atmosphere created by this rubato.

Aside from Debussy's manipulation of the habanera bass, the piece is defined by the alternation between straight triplets and syncopated groups of sixteenth notes. This juxtaposition can be seen in the right hand of mm. 32-35 (figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2. "La soirée dans Grenade" mm. 31-35

Even when played as written, these rhythmic fluctuations give the piece a slight feeling of swaying. Debussy enhances this feeling by playing neither purely straight nor syncopated triplets, but something in between. Straight triplets tend to rush the final note, while syncopated figures are played with a more relaxed execution of subdivisions, resulting in a gradation of rhythmic articulations. This blurring of note values, when layered with the over-dotted habanera rhythm, contributes to the "graceful nonchalance" indicated at the beginning of the piece.

Paul Carlson points out: "A distinction can be drawn between an actual dance piece, a stylized dance piece, and a piece that makes oblique reference to a dance."⁶² *La Soirée* assuredly falls into the latter category. The habanera bass is meant to evoke a general mood of a lazy Spanish

⁶² Carlson, *Early Interpretation*, 139.

evening rather than engender actual dancing. This distinction is evinced through the general rhythmic flexibility that is allowed both the melody and the dance pattern itself. The most prominent aspect of Debussy's performance, its languorous nonchalant character, is achieved through this overall rubato between melody and accompaniment that at times seems improvisatory but is nevertheless contained within rigid overall tempi.

While tempo rubato and rhythmic alteration were certainly not unique to Debussy's playing, Debussy uses over-dotting to a much greater extent in "La Soirée" than is typical of his playing or that of his contemporaries. While the exaggeration of *notes inégales* is subtler in other recordings included on the piano roll, Debussy's recording of "La soirée" reveals a deliberate exaggeration of the dotted figure, frequently to the point of double dotting. This special case of over-dotting is likely due to the habanera bass' associations with dance. In French Baroque music, dances were considered especially conducive to rhythmic inequality and over-dotting. Over-dotting created rhythmic propulsion to the downbeat and made it easier for dancers to feel the pulse. While the habanera is not a French dance, its associations with dance and the presence of rhythmic inequality made over-dotting particularly appropriate. Here Debussy could be engaging with the tradition of stylized dances and the various rhythmic alterations typical of this tradition.

We see other examples of Debussy catering to dance styles in his playing. His stepdaughter Madame de Tinan recalled that Debussy used to lift slightly before the long chords in the "Sarabande" of *Pour le piano* and in "Hommage à Rameau." As this lift is a typical nuance of Sarabande performances, and Debussy specified the genre in both pieces' headings, he may have assumed that such gestures would be second nature to pianists familiar with the Baroque keyboard

tradition. As Howat explains, “Debussy’s dots and dashes [in these pieces] have a particular allusion, and it pays us to relate any unusual articulation to context.”⁶³

“Danseuses de Delphes”

Debussy’s recording of “Danseuses de Delphes” is characterized by a restrained rubato and rhythmic flexibility. While maintaining an overall consistent tempo, he tends to ever so slightly relax the ends of phrases. The recording follows the tenuto markings in mm. 3-4 (see figure 4.3) by lingering on the dotted-eighth notes ever so slightly and clipping the consequent sixteenth notes.



Figure 4.3. “Danseuses de Delphes,” *Préludes* Book 1.

⁶³ Howat, ‘Debussy’s Piano Music,’ 87.

With the repetition of this rhythmic pattern, he takes more time with each passing figure through the downbeat of m. 4. While the score provides dynamic specifications, no such rhythmic meddling is indicated. After this repeating dotted figure, a series of cascading eighth-note chords launches the tempo from roughly $\text{♩} = 32$ to 38. Although Debussy only writes a tenuto marking over the final chord of this sequence, he begins to slow down drastically beginning with the second beat of m. 5. This *ritardando* continues to the cadence at the end of the measure, after which he takes a lengthy pause before beginning the next phrase.

While the recording is rich in such subtlet tempo fluctuation, the only instruction regarding tempo in the opening few measures of the score is the alternating *portato* and *tenuto* marks. The dynamic markings instead seem to shed more light on Debussy's intentions, particularly in mm. 3-4. As we've already noted, Debussy lingers on the dotted notes before slightly clipping the sixteenth notes. This articulation is paired with repeating crescendos that repeatedly retreat to piano. Rather than indicating a gradual increase in volume, these crescendos suggest isolated swells. Since the piano is unable to crescendo over a sustained note, Debussy instead expresses these swells as an acceleration through the sixteenth note. The diminution back to piano results in a slight lingering *ritardando* after the forward propulsion of the crescendo. Similarly, although Debussy does not specify a *ritardando* in m. 5, his gradual slowing of pace is foretold in the decrescendo beginning on the second beat of the measure. Changes in dynamics are expressed not only as fluctuating volume levels, but as overall tempo swells. In this passage and subsequent passages like it, we see Debussy using tempo not as a rigid structure, but as a flexible tool for

expression as reflected in his dynamic markings. As further evidence of Debussy's linking of dynamics with tempo, mm. 7-9 contain a similar repeating dotted figure, but without the crescendo markings. In the piano roll, Debussy pushes through these measure without the dramatic *ritard* of m 5.

The pairing of tempo fluctuations with dynamic changes is certainly not exclusive to Debussy's playing. Nevertheless, we see parallels between this pairing and the French harpsichordists' use of tempo rubato. As explored in chapter 3, Couperin struggled with how to compensate for the harpsichord's inability to vary in volume. He developed the idea of the suspension, a ritardando of sorts that produced effects similar to "a bowed instrument increasing its tone" by lingering slightly before an important note. Thus, rubato was used as an expressive device similar to changes in dynamics. We likewise see Debussy accompanying his dynamic indications in the score with expressive tempo fluctuations in his own playing. Such subtle expressive devices added to the overall sense of nuance ascribed to Debussy's playing by his contemporaries.

"Le danse de Puck"

In "Le danse de puck," the penultimate piece of the Book I *Preludes*, Debussy sought to portray the mischievous fairy from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Indicated *capricieux et léger*, the piece utilizes flighty 32nd notes and quick transitions to depict the spritely nymph. Debussy's piano roll performance is characterized by a lightness of touch in keeping with the score's opening instructions. He conveys the capricious nature of the fairy by exaggerating the

flighty rhythms and accentuating the staccato markings. The piece begins with dotted sixteenth and 32nd note pairs, with staccato marks on the flagged note of each pair (see figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4 “Le danse de puck,” *Préludes* Book 1.

Debussy chooses to further clip the staccato 32nd notes by lengthening the dotted note. This over dotting enhances the overall flighty effect of the dotted pattern and infuses the performance with an improvisatory feeling. At $\text{♩} = 138$, this articulation proves difficult to clearly articulate, as evinced in other early recordings of the piece. For example, in Alfred Cortot’s 1930 recording, the pianist breaks between the dotted sixteenth and 32nd notes rather than between pairs, so that slurs are played between the 32nd note and the following sixteenth. Debussy maintains the slur within each dotted pair, but only slightly articulates the staccato markings. While the overall tempo of the recording is quick, Debussy dramatically slows down between contrasting sections. For example, before launching into the upward-leaping 32nd notes in m. 8, he *ritards* to an almost stand-still. Right-hand trills in mm. 12-13 and later 16-17 are likewise played out of time before abruptly beginning the next section. This fragmentation of musical ideas creates an image of the mischievous fairy’s unpredictable motions.

While the opening seven measures are played without pedal, the remainder of the piece is played with heavy use of the sustain pedal. Debussy was notoriously opposed to dictating pedaling in his scores, as he believed that this should be left to the performer's best judgement. The heavy use of pedal throughout his own recording of "La danse de Puck" serves to create an ethereal, fairy-like atmosphere. Additionally, Debussy supplements this liberal pedaling with frequent rolled chords, as in the left-hand chords of mm. 34-40. In French Baroque music, rolled chords were frequently used to emphasize downbeats. Alternatively, rolled chords in "La danse de Puck" serve to undermine a clear sense of pulse. The piece already contains extremely minute rhythmic differences, such as sextuplets layered over 32nd notes, followed by triplets. Given the rhythmic complexity of the piece as well as Debussy's quick tempo, it is nearly impossible to perceive the difference between chords rolled for stylistic purposes and passages actually written as arpeggiations. The listener perceives only a wash of sound evocative of Shakespeare's fairy world.

"La cathédrale engloutie"

Debussy's performance of "La Cathédrale engloutie" is as rhythmically even as "Minstrels" is clumsy (discussed below), which supports my suggestion that rhythmic alterations in such pieces was deliberate. Here we see Debussy's insistence on playing with a steady pulse realized, as recalled by pianists such as Marguerite Long and Pierre Monteaux.⁶⁴ The biggest concern that performers of "La Cathédrale" face deals with the issue of shifting note values. Several passages of Debussy's piano roll are played twice as fast as the autograph score indicates (mm. 7-12, 22-

⁶⁴ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 153-187.

83, 86-89). This double tempo is corroborated in recordings by Alfred Cortot and George Copeland, as well as memoirs by Mme de Tinan and others who heard Debussy play the piece in concert.⁶⁵ In the *Ouvres Complètes*, Howat has remedied this problem by indicating $\text{♩}=\text{♩}$ before such passages. However, Debussy could have just as easily notated the passage with quarter notes. One wonders however why such a discrepancy exists in the autograph score. The similar tempo adjustments in recordings made by Debussy's students suggest that the sped-up passages were not simply one-off improvisations of the piano roll, but were calculated adjustments explicitly taught by Debussy. Likewise, the fact that Debussy proportionately relates the half note to the quarter note, effectively doubling his tempo, suggests that such alterations are not just the result of tempo rubato or an expressive pushing of the tempo, but are calculated performance decisions. Unfortunately, the composer's printed copy which may have included corrections has been lost. Still, no other glaring errors of this sort exist in the otherwise meticulously constructed autograph manuscript. Charles Burkhart has suggested that Debussy chose this perplexing notation to suggest subtle changes in the character of the music.⁶⁶ For example, he could have switched to half notes at m. 22 to indicate a change in character after the cessation of quick left hand sixteenth notes from the previous measure. However, the lack of any discernable change in tempo between these passages makes such a motivation doubtful, and frankly uncharacteristic of Debussy.

⁶⁵ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 104.

⁶⁶ Charles Burkhart, "Debussy Plays *La cathédrale engloutie* and Solves Metrical Mystery," *Piano Quarterly* 17, no. 65 (Summer 1992): 14-16.

Howat points to similar notational irregularities in French Baroque music as the source for Debussy's metric changes. He was engrossed in compiling Rameau's *Ouvres Complètes* while writing the first book of *Préludes* and had just recently finished his revision of *Les Fêtes de Polymnie* when writing "La Cathédrale engloutie." Changing note values were commonplace in French Baroque music, particularly operatic recitative. According to Howat, "The intricate metrical rules for setting French speech in Rameau's time (to which Debussy often referred when championing Rameau), coupled with an archaic avoidance then of 2/4 notation in operatic recitative, necessitated the augmentation of values to 2/2 in duple bars."⁶⁷ Performers of French Baroque opera would have been aware of the tradition of changing note values and would not have needed explicit indication in the score. Likewise, Debussy may have excluded the ♩=♩ mark because he assumed performers of his music would intuitively play the half notes at double tempo.

This notational dilemma becomes less straightforward in the final four bars of the piece, when the half notes are again played quicker than their meter would suggest. For the notes to be played exactly at double time as previously articulated throughout the piece, they would have to be played at 38 bpm. This passage is played at roughly 50 bpm however. Rather than inexplicably speeding up in the final four bars, it seems that Debussy intended the half notes to be played ♩=♩ as before, and then significantly slowed down. Still, Howat does not indicate ♩=♩ in his final edition, instead leaving it up to the performer to infer.

⁶⁷ Howat, "Debussy's Piano Music," 105.

“La plus que lente”

Of the piano rolls, “La plus que lente” contains the largest degree of tempo fluctuations. Debussy wrote the piece in 1910, the same year he completed Book I of his *Préludes*. At the time, Parisian salons were enamored with slow waltzes. Debussy’s work, titled “Even slower waltz” is considered his subtle way of mocking the genre. Marked *molto rubato, con morbidezza*, Debussy modifies the rhythms in certain passages to the point of blurring the downbeat. The most notable of such alterations occurs in the bass rhythm in the opening measures of the piece. The score indicates that the left hand should alternate measures of even quarter notes with measures of an eighth note leading to a dotted quarter note (figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6. “La plus que lente,” mm. 1-10.

However, the piano roll plays every measure as roughly eighth note - dotted quarter notes, beginning with the left hand’s entrance in m. 2. The bass is heard as $\flat G - \flat D - \flat B$ with $\flat D$ and

♭B heard distinctively rather than together. Measures in which the dotted rhythm is indicated are over-dotted. Here we see Debussy engaging with the Baroque practice of exaggerating *notes inégales* for expressive effect. The *tenuto* marking over the dotted quarter note could be the cause of such over dotting. However, this would not account for the clipped eighth note that precedes it, nor for the alteration of measures that don't contain a dotted rhythm at all. This rushing of the bass more likely stems from Debussy's tampering of the typical waltz pattern. Waltzes are in triple meter and generally feature a lower note in the bass leading to two higher notes, creating an "oom-pah-pah" feeling conducive to dancing. Debussy uses this pattern but displaces it so that the lower note, typically the downbeat, occurs on beat three of each measure. This pattern continues until m. 8, when the lower note is repeated on beat one and resumes its rightful place as the downbeat of the pattern. Debussy's over-dotting could be seen as an attempt to play catchup with the waltz rhythm and "correct" the metrical displacement. Interestingly, when the lower note is finally played on the downbeat of m. 8, Debussy plays straight quarter notes rather than continuing to alter the rhythm.

To say that these rhythmic diminutions and augmentations are played proportionally to the beat would be an over-simplification. Each measure is unique in the amount of time that Debussy lingers on the ♭D or shortens the ♭G. Likewise, the right hand is rich with tempo fluctuations. Dotted rhythms are frequently over dotted, such as in m. 10. The alternating eighth notes between F and ♭A in mm. 3 and 7 are played significantly faster than the rest of the musical phrase. In such passages that include a succession of eighth notes such as m. 33, Debussy tends to speed up

through the final beats, as if rushing to the downbeat. Other moments in which eighth notes lead to the beginning of a new section slow down significantly, such as mm. 27-32. No performance instructions dictate such local rhythmic fluctuations, aside from occasional *retenu* and *rubato* markings. While these instructions guide large-scale tempo changes, Debussy's performance shows a flexible, improvisatory approach to beats at the local level.

Such liberal manipulations of the tempo between both melody and accompaniment results in frequent displacement of the hands. Debussy often treats each hand as an independent melodic line - the left hand emphasizing the typical waltz pattern, the right hand playing with slightly stricter time but still succumbing to rubato. This results in passages reminiscent of the type of rubato first seen in Baroque vocal music, in which the voice indulges in expressive liberties over a steady accompaniment. As we've already seen in "La soirée dans Grenade" however, Debussy allows for rhythmic alterations in both the melody and accompaniment. Homophonic passages such as the parallel eighth notes in mm. 27-31 are played together. However, moments in which the hands play independent melodic ideas are rife with melodic displacement. This leads to the improvisatory quality so often ascribed to Debussy's playing.

While Debussy's playing was frequently described as flexible, the expressive rubato in "La plus que lente" seems to reach a new level. The piece's metric fluctuations are better understood when placed in the context of the waltz rhythm. As stated earlier, waltzes are in triple meter and tend to emphasize the first beat of each measure. The piano roll's constant push and pull of tempo could be an attempt to emphasize the stressed beats of the waltz. While waltzes were a nineteenth

century development, minuets from the Baroque era were also in triple meter and featured similar prioritization of the downbeat. Performance practice at the time dictated that minuets were to be played with stressed downbeats, frequently by rushing beat three. Debussy's constant push and pull within measures rather than gradually over phrases shows parallels with the Baroque tradition of stylized agogic accents. Just as Baroque players knew to emphasize certain beats within a dance, Debussy likewise plays his waltz with an understanding of the stresses inherent in the genre. It is again necessary to recall Carlson's caveat that playing a stylized dance is different from evoking a dance. In this instance, Debussy is not only evoking a dance, but possibly mocking the excess of sentimentality that had been associated with waltzes by the early twentieth century. Thus, the exaggerated swells and extreme rubato could also be Debussy's attempt to parody the genre.

“Minstrels”

Another recording in which Debussy experiments with parody is “Minstrels,” the last of the Book I *Préludes*. The piece was inspired by a group of musical clowns in blackface whom Debussy witnessed at the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne, England in the summer of 1905.⁶⁸ By the time of “Minstrels” composition in 1909, blackface minstrel shows had also become popularized in Parisian cafés and carnivals. Such shows frequently used the syncopated rhythms of ragtime to further imitate the American minstrel shows. Debussy's “Minstrels” includes syncopation but does not utilize characteristic ragtime rhythms. In this way, the piece is an imitation of ragtime rather than an authentic rag. Examining Debussy's recording in the context of imitation and parody sheds

⁶⁸ Carlson, “Early Interpretation,” 257.

new light on certain irregularities in his playing. The piece begins with falling sixteenth-note ornaments coupled with *staccato* sixteenth notes in the main melody of the right hand (figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7. "Minstrels," *Préludes* Book I, mm. 1-7.

Debussy exaggerates each *staccato* mark, allowing ample space between each note. Additionally, the right hand sixteenth notes are slightly rushed to allow even more space between each articulation before returning to original tempo for the left hand eighth notes. This constant push and pull, coupled with the *staccato* articulations, imbues the rhythm with a certain jerkiness, as Debussy spontaneously stops and starts.

Passages in which a single hand plays sixteenth notes tend to take off with accelerated tempi and frequently flawed rhythm. In mm. 11-12 after an aggressive *tenuto* D major chord, the right hand sixteenth notes are rushed and considerably garbled. Likewise, the *staccato* sixteenth notes in m. 17 are taken at nearly double speed. Such frequent and abrupt tempo changes impart a

clumsiness not commonly associated with Debussy's playing. Of these "scrappy" rhythms, Roy Howat has concluded that they are the result of nerves during the recording process.⁶⁹ While this is possible, other more challenging pieces on the roll such as "Le vent dans le plaine" are played with the utmost poise and rhythmic precision. Given the context of "Minstrels," we can instead interpret these rhythmic alterations as stemming from the *nerveux et avec humour* marking that begins the piece. The abrupt tempo changes and "scrappiness" of the *staccato* articulations closely mimic the syncopation of ragtime, which frequently accompanied minstrel shows. Rather than explicitly writing ragtime rhythms, Debussy parodies the rhythmic irregularities of such music in the score as well as in his playing. While ragtime features both a steady march-like bass with a freer syncopated melody, both hands in "Minstrels" are subjected to syncopation and overall rhythmic irregularities. His performance is thus a caricature of the deliberate roughness and sudden contrasts of both ragtime as well as minstrel shows themselves.

⁶⁹ Roy Howat, "Debussy and Welte," in *The Pianola Journal* 7 (1994): 16.

Chapter 5. The Early Debussystes

It is rather tricky using early recordings by Debussy's contemporaries to inform our understanding of his music. On the one hand, he was highly exacting and rarely satisfied with performances of his music. This makes even the recordings of those who studied with him questionable. This difficulty is intensified when we consider the disparate number of recordings made by these pianists and the varying qualities of their recordings. While painstaking work has gone into the restoration of Debussy's Welte-Mignon rolls, other rolls have not been treated with as much care. Nevertheless, a quick examination of some of the early recordings of Debussy's piano music reveals a wide spectrum of tempi, pedaling, dynamics, expressive accents, and rubato. These variances reflect a broader attitude toward artistic freedom of expression and personal interpretation inherent in the early-twentieth century.

Perhaps the most famous of the early Debussy interpreters was the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes. After impressing the composer with a rendition of his *Pour le piano* in 1901, Viñes practically became Debussy's official pianist, premiering *Estampes*, *L'isle joyeuse*, *Masques*, six of the *Préludes*, and both books of *Images*.⁷⁰ Unfortunately Viñes only recorded two of Debussy's pieces, "La soirée dans Grenade" and "Poissons d'or" in 1930. His recording of "La soirée" is notable for its quick pace. Beginning at ♩ = 138, his recording lasts only four minutes (compared to Debussy's five-and-a-half-minute roll). Not only is his playing much faster overall, but there are hardly any tempo changes or rubato. Moments marked *tempo rubato* such as mm. 23-28 are

⁷⁰ Charles Timbrell, "Debussy in Performance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 263.

rushed through at tempo, and *retenu* measures receive little if any expressive lingering. Gone are the over-dotted habanera rhythms of Debussy's recording. Chords that Debussy explicitly marked as rolled are played without arpeggiation. We can of course interpret Viñes's ignoring of Debussy's performance indications as expressive decisions in their own right. Still, the recording's quick pace and overall lack of tempo variance gives the piece a rather mechanical feel and does nothing to depict the languorous Grenada evening so prevalent in Debussy's playing. This is perhaps why around 1908 Debussy began to complain of Viñes's playing being "too dry," and he eventually stopped asking the pianist to play his works altogether.⁷¹ Despite this rift, as well as his own admission in a diary entry that "Debussy never finds ["La soirée"] played as he likes it," Viñes chose to record the piece as well as "Poissons d'or" years after the composer's death.⁷²

The only other early pianist to record "La soirée dans Grenade" was the American pianist George Copeland. Copeland was an avid champion of Debussy's music, and was one of the first to introduce American audiences to the piano music. After playing for the composer in 1911, Debussy allegedly remarked: "I never pay compliments. I can only say that I have never dreamed that I would hear my music played like that in my lifetime."⁷³ Our knowledge of Debussy's frequently harsh judgement of pianists however undermines the authenticity of Copeland's self-reported compliment. Thankfully, he recorded several of Debussy's pieces, as well as his own piano arrangement of *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune*. His recording of "La soirée" takes a

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Dunoyer, "Early Debussystes," 113-114.

similar quick tempo as Viñes's, clocking in at four minutes and 27 seconds. Overall, Copeland tends to play with a heavier hand and greater dynamic fluctuation than is present in Debussy's roll. His music therefore does not possess the restraint and nuance generally associated with Debussy's playing and those who studied with him. His recording of "Minstrels" is notable for its strategic exaggeration of *staccato* marks to create an overall playful feeling. Passages such as the *staccato* seventh chords of mm. 51-57 are played with a slight swing, imparting a bounciness to the phrase. *Tenuto* marks and *staccato*'s are frequently used interchangeably. His playing is frequently rather casual about wrong notes (perhaps a trait of the overall performance tradition of the early-twentieth century rather than Copeland's own playing).⁷⁴ Notably, his recording of "La cathédrale engloutie" takes certain measures at double speed just as Debussy does. It is likely that Copeland studied the piece with Debussy and received specific instructions about the composer's intent in such measures.

While many of the early Debussy pianists wax eloquent on the composer's admiration of their playing and the intimate relationships shared with him, Debussy is only ever recorded as praising two pianists: Walter Rummel and Marguerite Long. While both pianists enjoyed fruitful careers, Rummel never recorded any of Debussy's pieces, and Long only a handful of his works. It is thus difficult to say with certainty what facets of their playing particularly suited his music. Long had already enjoyed a lengthy collaboration with Gabriel Fauré when Debussy approached her in 1914 and asked to hear her play his music. The extraordinary clarity and grace of her playing

⁷⁴ Ibid., 115.

prompted Debussy's wife Emma to write to Long: "He has no performers whom he is happy; male pianists do not understand a thing about his music. We went to hear you recently: you are the only one who could play it well."⁷⁵ Such recommendations from Emma and her husband led Long to write the manual *Au piano avec Claude Debussy* detailing performance instructions for his piano pieces. The text is self-aggrandizing and frequently banal, but nevertheless offers valuable insight into pieces that Long is known to have studied with Debussy. Her recording of "La plus que lente" shares with Debussy's piano roll a sense of rubato at the local level. A consistent push and pull within measures ensures that the downbeat of each measure is slightly lingered upon. She similarly rushes through lengthy eighth note passages and lingers at the ends of phrases, as can be heard in mm. 27-32. Chords are frequently rolled for added emphasis of the waltz rhythm. Despite these performance liberties, an overall clarity of pulse characterizes the recording. Her playing achieves a classical balance of being direct without seeming cold.

Another pianist who intimately knew Debussy was the Franco-American pianist E. Robert Schmitz. Schmitz worked with Debussy over a period of two years, first accompanying singers in their coachings and eventually working with the composer himself on solo piano works. Like Long, Schmitz wrote a manual detailing his experiences working with Debussy and describing the composer's performance intentions. Of the two texts, Schmitz's is considered the more insightful, although his own recordings sometimes fail to reflect his intimate understanding of the pieces demonstrated in his writing. For example, Schmitz keenly described Debussy's intended effect of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 106.

crescendos, writing: “Crescendos in those days were one of Debussy’s obsessions in piano playing. He liked slight crescendos, a *ppp* increasing into a mere *pp*. Such tiny changes were meaningful and important to his art.”⁷⁶ Yet he frequently overdoes dynamics in his recordings, such as mm. 6-9 of “Danseuses de Delphes” where he forcefully plays *forte* for the entire phrase before abruptly switching to *pp* for the falling eighth notes. His recording of “Minstrels” is unique in the extreme tempo variances between sections. After articulating the quick ornaments and *staccato* sixteenth notes, Schmitz slows the ends of the opening four-bar phrases to a near standstill. He then abruptly launches into the *Mouvt* section with breakneck speed at m. 9. According to Schmitz, this section “reminds one of tap-dancing, with possible pirouettes or somersaults intervening.”⁷⁷ The charades of the minstrel show are depicted with quick changes of mood and juxtapositions of tempo.

Alfred Cortot likewise prolifically recorded Debussy’s music. Although of French origin, Cortot was known primarily as a performer and conductor of German music, especially Wagner’s (he was apparently so familiar with his operas that he could play them memorized at the piano).⁷⁸ Despite his German inclinations, he was also intimately acquainted with the French piano repertoire, including works by Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Franck, Chabrier, and D’Indy. His recordings include Book I of Debussy’s *Préludes*, all of *Children’s Corner*, and the Violin Sonata

⁷⁶ E. Robert Schmitz., *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 37.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁷⁸ Dunoyer, “Early Debussystes,” 112.

in G Minor played with Jacques Thibaud, all recorded between 1928-30. The overall tempi throughout most of these recordings is strikingly similar to Debussy's, possibly confirming the authenticity of composer's unusually quick tempi in his piano rolls.

Of the early Debussystes, Cortot's playing is probably the most self-indulgent. It is rich and heavy, lacking the restrained clarity of Long or Viñes's recordings. This is perhaps a reflection of his interest in German music, which commonly featured denser textures and a larger range of colors. These recordings are characterized by frequent rubati, dynamic swells, displacement of the hands, and rhythmic alteration. Cortot recalled the story of visiting Debussy's widow Emma soon after the composer's death and playing some of the *Préludes* for her. Afterwards he asked Debussy's daughter Chouchou whether his playing resembled her father's, to which she replied: "Yes, perhaps, yes... But Papa listened more carefully."⁷⁹

Cortot's recording of "Danseuses de Delphes" features several dramatically arpeggiated chords, such as in m. 9 and m. 16. His recording of "Le vent dans la plaine" showcases his virtuosity as he effortlessly articulates the racing sixteenth-note ostinati. In several passages he exaggerates Debussy's dynamic contrasts; his abrupt *f < p* articulations in mm. 30-31 for example sound jarring compared to the overall character of the piece. The *staccato* falling eighth notes in mm. 9-12 and later 50-53 are taken in double time. This accelerated tempo combined with exaggerated *staccato* markings adds a frenzied feel to the passage. His recording of "Le danse de

⁷⁹ Ibid., 113.

Puck” is distinguished from Debussy’s in its more sparing use of pedal. Whereas Debussy’s playing evokes the ethereal fairy land of the Puck, Cortot’s recording frequently sounds clumsy.

Post-War Styles

The scarcity of pre-war Debussy recordings makes it difficult to establish an early playing style of this music. While a much greater number of pianists studied with Debussy than the ones discussed above, only a fraction of them made recordings. We’re forced to rely on this handful of records as well as personal accounts of those who knew him to inform our understanding of the early performance tradition of his time. Even when considering these limited resources, we get a snapshot of a widely varied and richly improvisatory style of playing. Dynamics are often exaggerated; rhythmic figures are altered. Tempo was flexible, frequently bending to the expressivity of the musical moment or the performer’s whims. According to Marguerite Long, “There should be sufficient suppleness in the fluctuation of phrasing, a thing which wavers, that it is impossible to advise inexorable rigidity throughout a piece by marking the time.”⁸⁰ Gustav Mahler expressed similar sentiments, declaring: “All the most important things – the tempo, the total conception and structuring of a work – are almost impossible to pin down. For here we are concerned with something living and flowing that can never be the same even twice in succession.”⁸¹

Around the middle of the century however these performance liberties began to lessen. Performances have become more loyal to the score, and artistic choices between recordings have

⁸⁰ Philip, *Early Recordings*, 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

begun to narrow. For example, a comparison of tempi across recordings throughout the twentieth century reveals a gradual narrowing of overall tempi. Robert Philip has conducted several of such comparisons. Below is included his examination of performances of the first movement of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor (figure 5).⁸² Such a figure shows a lessening of tempo differences across performances, as the gap between maximum and minimum tempi narrows.

	<i>bar 1</i>	<i>bar 31</i>	<i>bar 41</i>
Grainger (rec. 1925)	♩ = 108	124	72
Cortot (rec. 1933)	108	148	c. 84
Lipatti (rec. 1947)	120	128	80
Kempff (rec. c. 1959)	112	112	96
Rubinstein (rec. 1959/61)	104	120	84
Perahia (rec. c. 1974)	100	108	88
Barenboim (rec. c. 1975)	112	112	92
Ax (rec. c. 1975)	108	108	96

Figure 5. Chopin, Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, first movement.

Tempo fluctuation certainly still exists in modern performances. However, it tends to occur more gradually over larger spans of time. Whereas early recordings may linger on an accented note and immediately return to the full tempo, later performers atone for the slight pause of an accent by gradually increasing back to the original tempo over several beats. Philip points out that the earlier type of agogic accent more closely mimics declamatory speech patterns, and often

⁸² Ibid., 19.

results in the over-dotting of notes, as seen in French Baroque styles.⁸³ Likewise, modern performers still sometimes slow down at lyrical passages, but rarely speed up at particularly excitable passages. The rampant acceleration heard in earlier recordings is foreign to modern listeners and frequently sounds uncontrolled. The result of such changes in rubato is that the maximum tempos within performances is frequently slower than in earlier recordings. This might help to explain Debussy's puzzlingly quick pace through many of the *Préludes* and all of *Children's Corner*. In addition to tempo fluctuations, the type of rubato characterized by the rhythmic dislocation of melody from accompaniment was one of the defining traits of early performance styles. By contrast, pianists today are strongly advised to play the left and right hands together, and any deviation from synchronization is seen as a lack of coordination.

It is no coincidence that this shift in performance style coincided with the commercialization of recording technology. Prior to the spread of this technology, musicians were only heard in real time, and each performance occurred only once. Precision and accuracy were of course valued in performance, but musicians could at least perform without fear of their mistakes leaving the concert hall. This fostered a more relaxed approach to performance, one in which musicians could afford to experiment and take artistic liberties. According to Philip, "Recorded performances from the early part of the century give a vivid impression of being projected as if to an audience. They have a sense of being 'put across,' so that the precision and clarity of each note is less important than the shape and progress of the music as a whole. They are intended to convey

⁸³ Ibid., 48-49.

what *happens* in the music, to characterize it. The accurate reproduction of the musical text is merely a means to this end.”⁸⁴

This attitude towards performance changed radically as recording studios grew in number and live concerts began to be recorded. Suddenly musicians were playing not only for the live audience, but (arguably more importantly) decades of future listeners. Mistakes that would have previously been forgotten by the end of the concert were now cemented in history. This resulted in a priority shift from artistic flexibility to flawless execution and pinpoint accuracy.

Likewise, performers gained the ability to record and examine their own playing for mistakes, leading to an unprecedented level of self-awareness and attention to minute detail. With the obvious outcome of producing cleaner recordings, this shift conversely resulted in a disciplining of performing styles. Artistic liberties such as expressive rubato, rolled chords, portamento, etc. were checked in fear of being too out of the norm, or interpreted as simply mistakes. A uniformity of playing began to develop that stuck close to the score. The advent of recording technology likewise resulted in the globalization of playing styles. Whereas previously a distinction could be made between different national styles of playing, these boundaries began to deteriorate as certain “master recordings” set a precedent for how pieces should be played.

A similar “tidying up” of performance can be observed in the recordings of Debussy’s music, such as those by Maurizio Pollini, Pascal Rogé, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, and Michel Dalberto. A comparison of the performance tradition of Debussy’s time with today’s more refined

⁸⁴ Ibid., 230.

styles paints Debussy's performance instructions in a new light. Debussy conceived of his piano pieces with an acute awareness of the French keyboard tradition, at a time when artistic liberties and flexibility of performance were the status quo. His strict mandates to loyally follow the score were given before changes in recording technology had prioritized pinpoint accuracy and squelched artistic freedom. While early-twentieth century music is hardly considered removed enough to warrant "period performances," an examination of the performance styles during this period could do much to inform our performances of this music today. Modern performances of the *Préludes* tend to closely follow Debussy's performance instruction. While on paper this is what Debussy wanted, only so much can be notated on the score, and many of these pieces were written at a time when performers would have implicitly known to over-dot a habanera rhythm or swell to the downbeat in a waltz. When considering his comments to publishers and pianists, we get a sense of Debussy as a conservative performer who wished to limit expressive freedom and performance liberties. However, had he lived today when the pendulum has swung towards more refined performances and less artistic expression, Debussy very well may have sung a different tune.

Bibliography

- Briscoe, James R. *Claude Debussy: A Guide to Research*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990.
- Brody, Elaine. "Viñes in Paris: New Light on Twentieth-Century Performance Practice." In *A Musical Offering: Essays in Honor of Martin Bernstein*. Edited by Edward H. Clinkscale and Claire Brooks. New York: Pendragon, 1997.
- Buch, David J. "Style Brisé, Style Luthé, and the Choses Luthées." *The Musical Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1985): 52-67.
- Burkhart, Charles. "Debussy Plays *La cathédrale engloutie* and Solves Metrical Mystery." *Piano Quarterly* 17, no. 65 (Summer, 1992): 14-16.
- Carlson, Paul. "Early Interpretation of Debussy's Piano Music." PhD diss., Boston University, 1998.
- Clevenger, John R. "Debussy's Paris Conservatoire Training." In *Debussy and His World*. Edited by Jane Fulcher, 299-362. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Cook, Nicholas. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Cook, Nicholas. "Changing the Musical Object: Approaches to Performance Analysis". In *Music's Intellectual History*, ed. Zdravko Blažeković (New York: RILM, 2009), 775-90. Portuguese translation, 2007.
- Cook, Nicholas. "Methods for Analysing Recordings." In *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*. Edited by Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and John Rink, 221-245. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Couperin, A. *The Art of Playing the Harpsichord*. Edited and Translated by Margery Halford. New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1974.
- Debussy, Claude. *Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings of the Great French Composer*. Edited by François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1977.
- Dumesnil, Maurice. *How to Teach and Play Debussy*. New York: Schroeder and Gunther, 1932.
- Dunoyer, Cecilia. "Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano." In *Debussy in Performance*. Edited by James R. Briscoe, 91-118. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

- Fulcher, Jane. "Debussy's Nationalism." In *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War*. Edited by Jane Fulcher, 170-193. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Heflin, Stephen E. *Rhythmic Alteration in Seventeenth – and – Eighteenth – Century Music: Notes Inégales and Overdotting*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1993.
- Howat, Roy. "Debussy and Welte." *The Pianola Journal: The Journal of the Pianola Institute* 7 (1994): 3-18.
- Howat, Roy. "Debussy's Piano Music: Sources and Performance." In *Debussy Studies*. Edited by Richard Langham Smith, 78-107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Howat, Roy. *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Hudson, Richard. *Stolen Time: A History of Tempo Rubato*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Jacobs, Paul. "On Playing the Piano Music of Debussy." *Cahiers Debussy* 3 (1979): 39-44.
- Leech-Wilkinson, Daniel. "Recordings and Histories of Performance Style." In *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*. Edited by Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and John Rink, 246-262. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Long, Marguerite. *At the Piano with Debussy*. New York: Littlehampton Book Services, 1972.
- Neumann, Frederick. "The Notes Inégales Revisited." *The Journal of Musicology* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 137-49.
- Nichols, Roger. *Debussy Remembered*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.
- Patteson, Thomas. "The Joy of Precision: Mechanical Instruments and the Age of Automation." In *Instruments for New Music*, 3-51. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.
- Philip, Robert. *Early Recordings and Musical Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Philip, Robert. *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- O'steen, Timothy William. "Analysis and Interpretation: Musical Analysis as a Technique for Performance Decisions in Selected Preludes by Claude Debussy." PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1997.

- Saint-Lambert, Monsieur de. *A New Treatise on Accompaniment*. Edited and Translated by John S. Powell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Saint-Lambert, Monsieur de. *Principles of the Harpsichord*. Edited and Translated by Rebecca Harris-Warrick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Schmitz, E. Robert. *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*. New York: Dover Publications, 1950.
- Schultz, Timothy. *Performing French Classical Music: Sources and Application*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2001.
- Smith, Charles Davis and Richard James Howe. *The Welte Mignon: Its Music and Musicians*. Vestal NY: Vestal, 1994.
- Smith, Richard Langham. "Debussy on Performance: Sound and Unsound Ideals." In *Debussy in Performance*, 3-27. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Suschitzky, Anya. "Debussy's Rameau: French Music and it's Others." *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 389-448.
- The Pianola Institute. *History of the Pianola – An Overview*. 2016.
<http://www.pianola.org/history/history.cfm>
- The Pianola Institute. *The Reproducing Piano – An Overview*. 2016.
<http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing.cfm>
- Timbrell, Charles. "Debussy in Performance." In *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*. Edited by Simon Trezise, 259-277. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Timbrell, Charles. *French Pianism: A Historical Perspective*, 2nd ed. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999.
- Toliver, Brooks. "Thoughts on the History of (Re)interpreting Debussy's Songs." *Debussy in Performance*, 135-156. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Select Discography

Claude Debussy

“Danseuses de Delphes,” “La cathédrale engloutie,” “La danse de Puck,” “Minstrels,” “Le vent dans la plaine,” “La plus que lente,” “La soirée dans Grenade.” Recorded in Paris 1910-1912 for M. Welte and Soehne.

Compact disc produced by Kenneth Caswell (Austin, TX, 1991).

Marguerite Long

“La plus que lente.” Recorded in 1929 (Columbia LFX 24)

Compact disc Pearl GEMM CD 9927 (Wadhurst, England, 1991)

Ricardo Viñes

“Soirée dans Grenade,” recorded in 1930 (Columbia D 15245)

Alfred Cortot

Préludes Book I, recorded in 1930 and 1931 (HMV DB1240-23)

Compact disc Biddulph Recordings LHW 006 (London, England, 1991)

George Copeland

“La cathédrale angloutie,” “Minstrels,” “La soirée dans Grenade.” (Victor 7963)

E. Robert Schmitz

Préludes Book I, 1947 (RCA Victor M1031)

Reissues in 1955 of *Préludes* Book I (RCA Camden CAL 179)

Vita

Vivian Buchanan, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, received dual Bachelor of Music degrees in Vocal Performance and Music History from the New England Conservatory of Music. She has since worked as a teaching assistant for Louisiana State University, helping to teach the undergraduate music history survey. She anticipates graduating with her master's degree in Musicology from LSU in August 2018.